

5-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

McInerny, Ralph (1989) "*Humanae Vitae* and the Principle of Totality," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 56: No. 2, Article 8.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol56/iss2/8>

“Humanae Vitae” and the Principle of Totality

Ralph McInerny

The author, the Michael P. Grace Professor of Medieval Studies at the University of Notre Dame, presented this paper at the 2nd International Conference on Moral Theology in Rome in November, 1988.

Putamus nostrae aetatis
homines aptissimos esse ad
perspiciendum, quam haec
doctrina sit humanae rationi
consentanea. (HV, n. 12)

Pope Paul VI's prediction in "Humanae Vitae" that his contemporaries were particularly well disposed to see that the inseparability of the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act precludes contraception has not, in the short term, been borne out, at least if one is guided by the amplified voices of dissenters. It is ironic that a general confidence in people of our day should have had so fragile a basis among some of the faithful themselves, even those to whom the Church has entrusted the teaching of moral theology. It was precisely to this inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act that Cardinal Ratzinger appealed in the "Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origins and on the Dignity of Procreation". Many have noted the symmetry between "Humanae Vitae" and the "Instruction on Respect for Life". It is the same principle that forbids separately the unitive from the procreative meanings in contraceptive sex and the separating of the procreative from the unitive in homologous artificial fertilization.

In this paper, after reflecting on that principle, I want to consider

the objection to it, based on the so-called "principle of totality", a symmetrical form of which has surfaced in reaction to the "Instruction on Respect for Life".

I. Unitive and Procreative Meanings

The second part of "Humanae Vitae" running from n. 7 through 18 is called, in one English translation, Doctrinal Principles. The Holy Father urges a proper understanding of the nature of the conjugal act, on the one hand, and of responsible parenthood, on the other, since these have been appealed to on behalf of behavior traditionally regarded as immoral.

Quocirca per mutuam sui
donationem, quae ipsorum propria
est et exclusoria, coniuges
illam persequuntur personarum
communione, qua se invicem
perficiant, ut ad novorum
viventium procreationem et
educationem cum Deo operam
sociant. (HV, n. 8)

By means of the reciprocal
personal gift which is proper
and exclusive to them, husband
and wife tend toward that
communion of their beings
whereby they help each other
toward personal perfection in
order to collaborate with God
in the begetting and rearing, of
new lives. (Calegari trans.)

This understanding of the marriage act is taken to be that which all men should have on the basis of natural reason. Pius VI then added that for baptized persons marriage takes on the dignity of a sacramental sign of grace and represents the union of Christ and the Church.

The characteristics and demands of spousal love which the encyclical then develops are four. It is human, that is, a love both sensible and spiritual. As a human act, spousal love is an act of deliberative will bearing on the use of our bodies in such a way as to promote an enduring union between man and wife and their mutual attainment of human perfection. It is a total and mutual giving of self, faithful and exclusive until death, which by its very nature is fruitful, ordered to bring new lives into existence.

Clearly this is a description of this human act as it ought to be, but these demands are exigencies of the act itself; it is an oral ideal that can and should be realized; that is, it is the measure of each instance of such activity. The doctrine of the encyclical is sometimes described as an "ideal" which should be acknowledged, but apparently not as one that can and should be realized. This kind of acceptance of "Humanae Vitae" as the expression of an unrealizable ideal which should nonetheless gain our assent is, of course, a rejection of and dissent from it. To characterize practical advice as in effect impractical is a somewhat Pickwickian way to praise it, let alone accept it.

Paul VI's remarks about responsible parenthood continue to develop a moral ideal on the basis of the nature of spousal love as human action. "Quoniam humana ratio in facultate vitae procreandae biologicas deprehendit leges, quae ad humanam personam pertinent: the intellect

discovers in the power of giving life biological laws that are part of the human person.” (n. 10) The reference here is to the “*Summa theologiae*”, Ia IIae, q. 94, a. 2, where practical reason’s judgment concerning the pursuit of the goods which are the object of natural inclinations are called the first principles of natural law. The biological laws are not themselves precepts of natural law, needless to say. Practical reason directs acts of deliberate will which bear on the ends of natural inclinations.

Porro ea, de qua loquimur, conscia paternitas praecipue aliam eamque intimam secum fert rationem, pertinentem ad ordinem moralem, quem obiectivum vocant, a Deoque statutum, cuius recta conscientia est vera interpret. Quapropter paternitatis consciae munus id postulat, ut coniuges sua officia erga Deum, erga seipsos, erga familiam, erga humanam societatem agnoscant, rerum bonorumque ordine recte servato. (HV, n. 10 in fine)

Responsible parenthood also and above all implies a more profound relationship to the objective moral order established by God, and of which a right conscience is the faithful interpreter. The responsible exercise of parenthood implies, therefore, that spouses recognize fully their duties toward God, toward themselves, toward the family and society, in a correct hierarchy of values.

It is against this background that Paul VI says that the Church is calling men back to the observance of the norms of natural law when she says that each and every conjugal act must remain open to the transmission of life. (HV, n. 11)

Humanly to engage in sexual activity is to respect the end and purpose of the activity engaged in and to relate it to the total good of the person, the marriage, the family, society, God. The conjugal act, sexual activity as engaged in by responsible human agents, both unites the partners and enables them to generate new life.

Quodsi utraque eiusmodi essentialis ratio, unitatis videlicet et procreationis, servatur, usus matrimonii sensum mutui verique amoris suumque ordinem ad celsissimum paternitatis munus omnino retinet, ad quod homo vocatur. (HV, n. 12)

By safeguarding both these essential aspects, the unitive and the procreative, the conjugal act preserves in its fullness the sense of mutual love and its orientation to man’s most high vocation to parenthood.

It is the profoundly reasonable and human character of this principle that, to return to my beginning, caused the Holy Father to think that men nowadays were particularly capable of confirming it. Why? Because of our readiness to see that for one spouse to force the conjugal act on the other without regard to particular circumstances and desires is no act of love and is in fact “a denial of the right moral order in the relations between spouses.” A forced act of mutual giving meant to enhance personal union as well as transmit life is a contradiction of the act, not an

instance of it. The Pope's assumption that this would be readily seen does not seem overly optimistic. So he goes on.

Pariter, si rem considerent,
fateantur oportet, actum amoris
mutui, qui facultati vitam
propagandi detrimento sit, quam
Deus omnium Creator secundum
peculiares leges in ea
insculpsit, refragari tum divino
consilio, ad cuius normam
coniugium constitutum est, tum
voluntati primae vitae humanae
Auctoris. (HV, n. 13)

By parity of reasoning, one who
reflects carefully must also
recognize that an act of mutual
love that prejudices the
capacity to transmit life that
God the Creator, according to
particular laws inserted
therein is in contradiction
with the design constitutive
of marriage and with the will
of the Author of Life.

What is the argument? The unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act are inseparable from it. A forced conjugal act destroys the unitive meaning; contraception destroys the procreative meaning. Neither is an appropriate instance of the act; both are negations of the nature of the act. That is what Pope Paul VI thought men of our day are particularly ready to accept.

II. The Principle of Totality

When at the outset of "Humanae Vitae" Paul VI lists some of the reasons why it was thought necessary to take a new look at the traditional Church teaching on marriage, reasons he states with fairness and sympathy, he identifies one putative basis for reconsideration as based on the principle of totality.

An praeterea, principio
totalitatis, quod appellant, in
hac re adhibito, non liceat
arbitrari consilium fecunditatis
minus uberis, sed magis rationi
consentaneae, posse actum,
physice sterilitatem afferentem,
in licitam providamque gignendae
prolis moderationem vertere. An
videlicet fas non sit opinari
finem procreandae prolis potius
ad totam coniugum vitam, quam ad
singulos quosque eius actus
pertinere. (HV, n. 3)

Or else, by extending to this
field the application of the so-
called 'principle of
totality; could one not admit
that the intention or a less
abundant but more rationally
controlled fertility transforms
a materially sterilizing
intervention into a permissible
and wise control of births?
Could one not admit, in other
words, that the procreative
finality pertains to conjugal
life taken as a whole, rather
than to its single acts?

Not only does the encyclical cite this argument, it responds to it. Nonetheless, dissenters sometimes invoked it as if the Pope had overlooked it.² It underscores the symmetry of "Humanae Vitae" and the "Instruction on Respect for Life", that the principle of totality should be invoked in dissenting from the latter to suggest that a couple's having recourse to homologous artificial fertilization can be justified if attention is paid to the whole story of their life together.

There is, I would say, good reason to consider contraception, IVF and AIH as capable of enhancing the natural course of a marital life in the same way that a caesarean section and bottle-feeding with special supplements do. There can be artifice and technology that enhance nature. But that needs to be evaluated within the full continuity and integrity of a couple's sexual life. The moral worth of technical intervention would derive from whether the union itself was generous between the spouses and toward offspring.³

Prof. Oliver O'Donovan of Oxford objected that in "Humanae Vitae", "Chastity in marriage was analyzed into a series of particular acts of sexual union, a proceeding which carried with it an unwitting but unmistakable hint of the pornographic." Since Burtchaell cites O'Donovan at some length, it can be assumed that what the Oxonian has to say of "Humanae Vitae" as well as of the "Instruction on Respect for Life" is considered a high example of the defense of the principle of totality.

A married couple do not know each other in isolated moments or one-night stands. Their moments of sexual union are points of focus for a physical relationship which must properly be predicated of the whole extent of their life together. Thus, the virtue of chastity as openness to procreation cannot be accounted for in terms of a repeated sequence of chaste acts, each of which is open to procreation. The chastity of a couple is more than the chastity of their acts, though it is not irrespective of it either.⁴

Burtchaell and O'Donovan provide us with fairly recent statements of the way the principle of totality is invoked to justify what the Church condemns. I find a very curious theory of action lurking behind their remarks and I think it will be useful to bring it out into the open, the more so because it seems to me that the principle the two men invoke provides a very feeble defense of what they have set out to champion.⁵

How does "Humanae Vitae" reply to the argument based on the principle of totality? Reconsideration has led the Holy Father to declare once again that "cum quis dono Dei utitur, tollens, licet solum ex parte, significationem et finem doni ipsius, sive viri sive mulieris naturae repugnant eorumque intimae necessitudini, ac propterea etiam Dei consilio sanctaeque eius voluntati obnititur: those who make use of this divine gift while destroying it, even if only partially, its significance and its finality, act contrary to the nature of both man and woman and of their most intimate relationship, and therefore contradict also the plan of God and his will." (n. 13) Given this judgment, following on the very nature of the conjugal act, the dismissal of the argument for contraception based on the principle of totality is inevitable.

Neque vero, ad eos coniugales
actus comprobandos ex industria
fecunditate privatos, haec
argumenta ut valida afferre

And to justify conjugal acts
made intentionally infertile
one cannot invoke as valid
reasons the lesser evil, or the

licet: nempe, id malum elegendum
esse, quod minus grave videatur;
insuper eosdem actus in unum
quoddam coalescere cum actibus
fecundis iam antea positus vel
postea ponendis, atque adeo
horum unam atque parem moralem
bonitatem participare. Verum
enimvero, si malum morale
tolerare, quod minus grave sit,
interdum licet, ut aliquod maius
vitetur malum vel aliquod
praestantius bonum promoveatur,
numquam tamen licet, ne ob
gravissimas quidem causas,
facere mala ut eveniant bona . . .

(HV, n. 14)

fact that when taken together
with the fertile acts already
performed or to follow later,
such acts would coalesce into a
whole and hence would share in
one and the same moral
goodness. In truth, if it is
sometimes permissible to
tolerate a lesser moral evil in
order to avoid a greater evil
or to promote a greater good,
it is not permissible, not even
for the gravest reasons, to do
evil so that good may follow
therefrom.

Paul VI must, of course, view the argument drawn from totality as violating the principle that evil may not be done that good might come. A conjugal act so engaged in that it is directly rendered infertile is a denial of one of the very meanings of the act — its procreative signification. As such, contraceptive sex is morally wrong. To engage in contraceptive sex on the assumption that good things will thereby come about for the couple and their family is to do an evil that good may come.

Those who dispute this do not, of course, want to allow that the contraceptive act is immoral. To avoid this, they suggest another way of appraising actions, not one at a time, but as elements in a moral unity which is the whole marriage. O'Donovan agrees that without subordination to the couple's quest for fruitfulness in their union, homologous artificial fertilization would be an offensive act. By parity of reasoning, presumably, the contraceptive act would have to be subordinate to the couple's quest for union. Or perhaps in either case the subordination is to the couple's quest for union and fruitfulness. The point of the dissent in any case is that the act taken singly has no moral value.

This must be distinguished from the tack taken by Burtchaell in the passage quoted above, where contraception, IFH, AIH, caesarean sections and bottle-feeding were lumped together as all involving artifice and technology. It is, of course, disingenuous to read the Instruction as expressive of a Luddite distrust for technology, since it goes out of its way to make clear that is not the point.⁶ Despite this lapse on Burtchaell's part as to what the principle of totality is taken to justify (surely the questions raised about contraception and homologous artificial fertilization are not raised about caesarean sections and bottle feeding), his statement of the principle is helpful. "The moral worth of technical intervention would

derive from whether the union itself was generous between the spouses and toward offspring.”⁷

Kierkegaard contrasted what he called the aesthetic sphere, symbolized by the seducer, and the ethical sphere, symbolized by the husband. The former is episodic, the repetition of moments, the same damned thing over and over; this note of the aesthetic is captured by Leporello’s aria in “Don Giovanni”, citing his master’s conquests — one thousand and three in Spain alone! The ethical, on the other hand, involves the acquiring of a history by surmounting the moment and developing a life. Those who invoke the principle of totality remind us that marriage is a pact meant to last a lifetime, that the spouses enter into it with an eye to the long haul, pledging their love until death do them part. A marriage is thus a mutual effort to acquire a character, to do well a work that neither spouse can do alone. The marriage is somehow a whole that is greater than its parts and it is the whole which confers moral value on the parts, not the other way around.

The theory was not invented ad hoc to discuss marriage. It is a theory about the moral life as such seemingly reminiscent of Aristotle’s, “One swallow does not make a spring.” One good action does not give us a good character; and of course when virtue is had, a good character gained, it is a cause of further good acts, not simply their effect. The attractiveness of the appeal to totality, then, is that it calls attention to features of the moral life which have long been recognized. It seems clear that those who invoke it have in mind such home truths as that a human life does not consist of a single episode, that the moral life is a task over time in which a history is acquired and we become the kind of person we morally are.

Nonetheless, the principle of totality seems to me to be quite different from the tradition it apparently evokes, a sign of which is that neither a Kierkegaard nor an Aristotle would have accepted the theory of action thought to be implied by the principle of totality.⁸ Kierkegaard’s notion that the ethical life is the acquisition of a history never leads him to suggest that the acts making it up should be, on the average, good. No more does Aristotle, insofar as he distinguishes between a good action and a good character, think that actions taken one at a time cannot be morally appraised. Surely the goodness or badness of the moral life taken as a whole is essentially dependent on the goodness or badness of the acts which make it up. If this is so, it cannot be the case that the individual acts are what they are morally because they are components of a good life. Surely when we say of someone that he has lived a good life, we are speaking of the constituent acts of his life. The life is good because the acts which make it up are good, not the other way around.

The proponents of the principle of totality would not want to countenance an act of marital infidelity by saying that when absorbed

into the marriage taken as a whole, it loses its negative note. Yet they seem to invite such an appeal.⁹ Say it is a single lapse. Our attitude toward the unfaithful partner would be a good deal different than it would be if such infidelity were frequent; the one time adulterer is not as bad as the married philanderer. True as that is, it in no way alters the fact that the act of adultery as such is morally wrong. One sin does not make a vicious person anymore than one good act makes one virtuous. But it is single acts which are the primary carriers of moral quality and are good or bad. Perhaps what misleads here is confusing habits or character and acts. One must have a track record of a certain kind before we account him courageous or just. But he will acquire the desired character by means of acts of a certain moral kind.¹⁰

The conceptual question facing the proponents of the principle of totality, then, seems unanswerable. How can a plurality of acts have a moral character denied to each of them taken singly? To speak of single acts as episodes suggests that they can have no moral value as such. But if they cannot, neither can the life of which they form parts. The married life of a couple may indeed in the main be made up of morally good conjugal acts, but this provides no basis for saying that this contraceptive conjugal act is not bad. To say that it is good because it is an episode in a good life will entail denying that the single act of adultery is wrong. We may have to wait years before we can confidently say that the spouses have a good married life, but in the meantime they must act and the deeds they do must meet presently applicable moral standards. On the basis of the dissenters' appeal to the principle of totality, "Make me chaste, Lord, but not yet," could become an exculpating principle of universal application.

Those who dissent from "Humanae Vitae" on the basis of the principle of totality have, in fact, no basis for dissent. They admit that the life of the spouses will be morally good only if it is one of generosity toward one another and toward offspring, and this seems an acceptance of the unitive and procreative meanings as essential to married life taken as a whole. But if these two meanings can only be honored in singular acts, on which basis the married life taken as a whole is said derivatively to honor them, it is in singular acts that the moral significance of the spouses' life will lie. The principle of totality cannot ground the claim that singular acts which, taken as such, are offensive, cease to be so when considered in the light of the moral life taken as a whole. The moral imperative is not that we should act well more often than not. Rather it is: Do good and avoid evil.

References

1. I am using the English translation of "Humanae Vitae" made by Marc Calegari, S.J. and published by Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1978. Sometimes the slightest of variations have been made, but more for stylistic than doctrinal reasons. Of course no translation satisfies, which is why I put the original and the English side by side.

2. Thus my colleague James T. Burtchaell, C.S.C., writing in *The National Catholic Reporter* on May 8, 1987 on the occasion of the appearance of *Respect for Life*, about to invoke the principle of totality against the teaching of the instruction, recalls his dissent from "Humanae Vitae" on the same ground. "According to the ethical model followed by Humanae Vitae, one must assign moral value to methods of contraception within the isolated event of coitus, rather than the full sequence and story of love and childbearing throughout the course of a marriage. The pope parts company with his advisory commission, which reported, 'The morality of sexual acts between married people takes its meaning first of all and specifically from the ordering of their actions in a fruitful married life, that is, one which is practiced with responsible, generous and prudent parenthood. It does not then depend on the direct fecundity of each and every particular act.'" (p. 21)

3. *Ibid.* With respect to the Instruction's arguing that (in Father Burtchaell's paraphrase) "sexual union is damaged when it involves a generative act that does not involve the marital embrace," Father Burtchaell writes, "Here, I suspect, some good principles might be getting a careless application. The generative act is being viewed as an isolated event, separate from the sequence of sexual union that the married couple have enacted all along. And we are not given a principle adequate to discern when technology is assisting and when it is intruding." (p. 21) With regard to that last specific point, since the technology could be carried on years after the spouses are dead it could not be said either to assist or intrude into their generative act. And the same is true of the present. It is not their act.

4. O'Donovan as quoted by Burtchaell in the article cited. The application of this line of thinking to the problems of the instruction is also made by O'Donovan. Speaking of IVH and AIH, O'Donovan writes, "There are *distinct* acts of choice, which may involve persons other than the couple, in any form of aided conception, including those forms of which [Catholic official opinion (sic)] approves. Whether they are *independent* acts of choice is precisely the question which requires moral insight. If they are indeed independent (and not subordinate to the couple's quest for fruitfulness in their sexual embrace), then they are certainly offensive. But that point cannot be settled simply by asserting they are distinct. The question remains: Is there a moral unity which holds together what happens in the hospital and what happens at home in bed? Can these procedures be understood appropriately as the couple's search for help within their sexual union (the total life-union of their bodies, that is, not a single sexual act)? And I have to confess that I do not see why not."

5. O'Donovan's curious suggestion that taking acts singly is somehow pornographic seems to invoke a principle used in legal quarrels over pornography. Episodes in a story must be considered in the light of the role they play in the whole. The novelist will, of course, write of immoral acts and as a rule his treatment of them will be judged in terms of the role they play in the overall story. Doubtless it is when sexual misbehavior, say, or simply sexual activity, is so described as to appeal to the reader's prurience that the episode asserts itself independently of the whole novel. That would be an artistic flaw. A form of the principle of totality is involved in saying that such a novel can have sufficient redeeming merit to save it from such civic condemnation as is still possible. Of course the principle of totality in this second sense is very different from that which would apply to the artistic unity of the novel.

6. "Science and technology are valuable resources for man when placed at his service and when they promote his integral development for the benefit of all; but they cannot of themselves show the meaning of existence and of human progress." — Introduction, n. 2.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Burtchaell goes on to invoke the instruction's insistence that human sex is unlike animal sex "and its biological aspects must be viewed in the light of its human aspect."

8. When Aristotle seeks to establish what makes a man good, he seeks the function the well performance of which makes a man good. The person is denominated good because he acts well; when acting well is grounded in character he will be called a good person in a more profound sense. He can be counted on to perform singular acts of a given moral kind.

9. A candidate for the United States Senate from Maryland invoked the principle of totality (not by name) in just this fashion in an interview in the *Washington Post* on Nov. 3, 1988. His antics at beach parties having come to the attention of the electorate, Mr. Robb said that he liked to have a little fun from time to time, but he did not want voters to think his infidelity detracted from his love for his wife and daughters.

10. In our previous meeting I developed this point further. See, "Fundamental Option," *Persona: Verita e Morale*, Citta Nuova Editrice, Roma, 1987, pp. 427-434.
